

# *A*frican Literature

*Overview and Bibliography*

Jonathan P. Smithe

NOVA



# **AFRICAN LITERATURE: OVERVIEW AND BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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# OVERVIEW OF AFRICAN LITERATURE

*Jonathan P. Smithe (Editor)*

In order to present even a bare bones outline of African literature, it is necessary to make clear that African literature differs from French, Russian, and English literature in the sense that Africa is, of course, a massive continent consisting of 51 countries, whereas each one of the earlier-mentioned types of literature are specific to those countries. Africa as a continent has been subjected to the colonial influences of the English, Portuguese, French, German, Dutch and numerous other colonizers and invaders. Each of them have, of course, left their indelible influence on those parts of Africa which they occupied.

African history can be divided into several parts: Ancient Africa from the beginnings before Christ to the First Century, which leads into the African Empire phase, which extended up until the Fifteenth Century, the African Slave Trade and European Imperialism Stage, which extended from the Fifteenth to the early Nineteenth century, the anti-colonialism and reconstruction phase that lasted from the Nineteenth to the mid-Twentieth Century, and the post-independence Africa and contemporary Africa from the mid-Twentieth Century until now.

Within the enormous continent of Africa, which contains about 20 percent of the world's total land area and about 15 percent of its population living in over 12,000 square miles, there are more than 3,000 distinct ethnic groups. Each of these ethnic groups has its own literature, either written or oral. Within these 3,000 ethnic groups there are over 1,000 separate languages spoken with more than 50 major languages, which are Arabic, Swahili, and Housa. The major religions in Africa are Christianity and Islam. Africa has a long tradition of being a battleground for religious influence.

In general, Africa can be divided into North Africa, West Africa, East Africa, and South Africa. Africa has witnessed a rich and well-developed oral literature, which has maintained its texture and continues to today. This oral literature takes the form of poems, proverbs, riddles as well as myths, legends, stories, dramas, songs, and folk tales. A few of the many topics reflected in the oral literature include accepted social codes of conduct, a belief in the supernatural, the activity of clans, and folk tales featuring particularly the tortoise, hare, and spider.



African myths in general attempt to deal with the subject of the creation of the universe and with the activities of the gods during the beginning of creation. On the other hand, African legends tend to deal with the universe as the listener would need to understand it. In particular, legends focus on heroic human feats such as the establishment of clans of dynasties or somehow dealing with disasters. In this sense the legend shares characteristics of the epic in their joint focus on heroism. Legends are, however, less elaborate. Folk tales are usually saved for night time entertainment and feature animals and humans. One of the types of folk tales is the trickster tale, which employs a clever animal utilizing its cleverness to evade harm from larger and more powerful animals. Typical animal tricksters are Anansi, a spider in the folklore of the Ashanti people, Ajapa, a tortoise from the Yoruba folklore of Nigeria, and Sungaura, a hare from Central and East African folklore.

Some of the oral literature has been recorded, particularly in the Congo and in parts of Southern Africa. In the transmission of oral literature, presentation and oratory are major focal points. Call-response techniques are used by folk tale tellers and narratives are often accompanied by music and a praise singer.

The earliest written African literature has been found in the northern part of Africa, which has traditionally maintained ties with Europe and the Middle East. The writings of West Africa were heavily influenced by Islamic writings. West African written poetry, by and large, is of a religious nature. The most well known among West African religious poets was Abdullah Ibn Muhammed Fudi (1767-1828). The written literature of East Africa also reflects the Arab influence. Amongst the earliest original Swahili work is the epic poem *Utendi wa Tambaku*, which is usually dated as 1728. Swahili poetry is also, by and large, descended from Arabic poetry. Among later Swahili poems are the famous religious poem *Utendi wa Inkishafi* (*Soul's Awakening*), which was written by Sayyid Abdellah bin Nasir (1720-1810), *Utend wa Liyongo Fumo* (epic of Liyongo Fumo) was written by Muhammad bin Abubakar in 1913. Around the beginning of the Twentieth Century various Africans began to publish their creative writings in several African and European languages which begins, for all intents and purposes, the era of contemporary African literature.

Some of the more famous figures in early African literature include Christian Theologian St. Augustine and the Fourteenth Century Islamic historian, Ibn Khaldun, as well as Abd al-Rahman al Sadi (1596-1655), who wrote *Parikh as-Sudan* (history of the Sudan), Mahmud Kati (1468-1570), who wrote *Parikh al-Fettach*. The Tertullian, who was the first important Christian Ecclesiastical writer who wrote in Latin.

The slave narratives were important writings which included *The Interesting Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789), which described the slave trade in all of its savagery. Many of the earlier writings were reaction against the colonial repression of native African writers.

Islam brought literacy to Africa in the form of the Arabic language as early as the Eleventh Century in Ghana. Islam has spread during the interim to reach other countries and brought with it the spread of literacy as well. Most of this literacy deals with or dealt with the study of the Koran, which is the sacred literature of Islam. Literacy was also enhanced by the spreading of Christianity and by the presence of a vast network of trade activities.

The best known literatures in African languages include the Amharic, the Somali, and Swahili in East Africa, the Sotho Xhosa and Zulu in Southern African, and the Yoruban Hausa in West Africa.

Literature written in Africa can be traced back at least to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. African fiction in French dealt with the struggle against colonialism, the search for identity, and conflicts with tyranny after independence.

The following tables list some of the prominent African writers.



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